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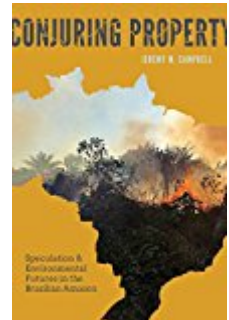


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Reviewed by Antoine Acker

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Commissioned by Casey M. Lurtz (Johns Hopkins University)

In an article published in 1996, the Brazilian sociologist José de Souza Martins “unmasked” a document about the conquest of the territory of the Goitacá Indians, presumably dating from the seventeenth century.[1] The piece, which Souza Martins suggested had been actually produced in the nineteenth century to forge a proof that would support a land property claim, had turned into a major source for many a historical analysis of colonial Brazil. It is not unlikely that today’s most consensual accounts of the country’s history might be partly based on other such forged sources. Indeed, the practice of “grilagem”—originally, forging a land title and letting *grilos* (crickets) defecate on and chew it to make the paper look old and thus authentic—has been common in Brazil since at least the end of the colonial era.

How property has been fabricated by actors from different social categories in the absence of a comprehensive and efficiently centralized land register is the topic of the anthropologist Jeremy M. Campbell’s latest book on the Brazilian Amazon. Just as was shown by Souza Martins’s revela-

tion, Campbell evidences how “conjuring property” fundamentally amounts to constructing specific accounts of the past that are tailored to serve private interests. But in order to be granted legitimacy, these accounts also inscribe themselves in collective visions for the future. In that sense, illicit property making is associated with the definition of the Amazon as a pristine forest to be conquered by brave settlers, staging themselves as “pioneers” of a national epopee of economic development.

Campbell’s study is the result of forty months of observing, becoming familiar with, and interviewing settlers in and around the village of Castelo de Sonhos, located along the famously dysfunctional BR-163 highway, in the southwestern corner of the Amazonian state of Pará.[2] It analyzes the long-term, but at the same time highly flexible strategies of these settlers, mostly arrived in or after the 1990s, to secure land tenure. The social context is one of very marked hierarchies going from subsistence farmers (the *pequenos*) to well-organized ranchers practicing

land-grabbing to follow a logic of capitalist accumulation (the *grandes*). Although *pequenos* and *grandes* deploy their strategies in the quasi-absence of state government, they constantly embed their property claims within the norms according to which they expect the state to rule in the future.

In this regard, Campbell's book, although mainly based on fieldwork conducted in the twenty-first century, is in dialogue with nearly fifty years of Amazonian history, that is, history since the region entered a phase of increased political attention, massive deforestation, and multiplying land conflicts. It shows how settlers position themselves in relation to the development plans drafted and unsuccessfully implemented by the Brazilian state since the late 1960s. Although these contradictory plans for agrarian modernization, capitalist investment, partial land redistribution, and intensive extraction have failed, they continue to serve as a repertoire of discourses, practices, values, and projects, which Campbell calls "the development archive." Actors of modern settlement and property conflicts do more than draw from this archive to replace an absent central authority. They were also brought to the region by the development archive. Many *grandes* came to the Amazon tempted by its speculative possibilities and by the government's active steps to attract entrepreneurs from Brazil's South and Southeast. The first waves of *pequenos*, in turn, landed in the Amazon through big state colonization schemes, or under the sway of the propaganda campaigns that presented the rain forest as a "land without men for men without land."^[3] *Castelenses* (the inhabitants of Castelo de Sonhos) are both anxious to become recognized landowners while at the same time remaining haunted by the dreams of progress that brought them to the Amazon. This combination produces a sensation, shared by most settlers, of being "before history" (p. 97). While Campbell argues that this sensation results from the feeling of being abandoned by the state and "stuck" in time, one can safely say

that it is also coupled with a consensual negation, among the settlers, of any form of history prior to them. This negation is expressed through recurrent assertions and clichés that belittle the abilities and dignity of Indigenous people and depict them as socially useless, or even obstacles to progress.

Campbell denies neither the racist vision of the world, in which many settlers, *grandes*, and *pequenos* seem at times to be mentally stuck, nor the operations of intimidation, violence, and subjugation with which some of them (especially *grandes*) act. However, his analysis goes well beyond, and reflects the plurality of strategies with which settlers attempt to find a place for themselves on the local map, or sometimes even more simply, secure a lot where they can produce enough to make a living. Through concrete examples, Campbell shows the multilayered character of property making by which actors on the Amazon "frontier" play with expectations as they evolve as farmers.

After a first chapter that sets the historical and geographical stage for the study, chapter 2 explores *grilagem* as a widespread practice in the region, used by everyone from rural trade unionists to large-scale landowners in order to both defend and extend their control of the landscape. *Grilagem*, Campbell explains, does not only involve forging and buying titles but also direct interventions on the landscape, such as clearing and fencing, and strategies to proletarianize homesteaders. Chapter 3, which analyzes the scramble for the acquisition and making of property "before" the existence of a legal framework, shows the symbolic side of this process. Campbell names it "speculative accumulation" in the sense that it consists in "preparing stories, arranging histories, cutting deals, and projecting confidence" (p. 122) in the aim of providing a sufficient amount of (often invented) historicity for property, to be later regularized as part of the government-promoted push for progress, whether eco-

nomic or ecological (chapter 4). *Conjuring Property*'s fifth and last chapter finally addresses the much-expected question of regularization by analyzing some features and effects of the "Terra Legal" program, an attempt by the government launched in 2009 to regularize the chaotic land tenure situation of the Amazon. Although it was framed according to a differentiated regime of granting land, which favored small settlers over big ranchers, grandes were legally and materially better equipped to take advantage of the new rules. Taking into account the fact that the program leaves out ruling for all land subject to multiple property claims, Campbell's interpretation is that Terra Legal "obscures as much as it reveals" (p. 174). Although Campbell does not say it as bluntly, the reader is left with the impression that the sheer amount of paperwork, manipulation, stories, superposed claims, and competing interventions into the landscape has made it definitely impossible to distinguish the illicit from the licit.

Without losing sight of Castelo de Sonhos, the last chapter on Terra Legal as well as the book's conclusion provide a much-sought Amazon-wide perspective. By repeatedly resorting to a vocabulary that refers to the whole region, especially in topic sentences, the book rhetorically suggests that what happens in Castelo is, at least to some extent, valid for the whole Amazon. Having studied an opposite corner of the state of Pará myself, I do recognize many common traits that frame local land conflicts there and in Castelo. That said, Campbell ought to explain more concretely whether and why Castelo can be considered an emblematic case. There is not one, but many Amazons, and I missed Campbell's reflection on the implications of primarily defining Castelo as an "Amazonian" locality, especially in view of the impressive precision with which the other key concepts of the book are defined. Our perception of the Amazon as a united space is a rather recent and fragile construction. Until the nineteenth century, the use of the term was confined to designating a river or at best a river system, and even to-

day it stands in association with multiple meanings, that are alternatively geographic, administrative, cultural, or biological. Besides, the idea of an Amazonian "whole" results in part from global representations, such as the Amazon's rise to an environmental symbol since the late 1970s, whose relevance for studying local settlers' lives might be important, but still has to be demonstrated. How does Campbell's *Amazon* relate to these representations and what is the Amazonian unity to which his book implicitly refers? A deeper confrontation with colonial and nineteenth-century history in the first chapter might have been helpful to inform the reader in this regard. The reason I raise this point is that aside from its contribution to the anthropology of property, Campbell's book is a real novelty for studies on the Amazon. It helps rethink the region's identity and history by showing the agency of small and mid-range settlers with unprecedented precision and evidence.

For decades, literature on the Amazon rested almost entirely on dependent development theories and the idea that everything, from deforestation to labor exploitation, was explainable through relations of production. This analysis especially underlined the role of the state in supervising the process of capitalist accumulation by making ground for big farmers to despoil subsistence peasants and expel Indians. Of course, this dimension is relevant, and Campbell, when necessary, makes skillful use of Marx's theories to analyze the link between property making and workers' alienation as well as the transformation of property into capital. Yet he also challenges certitudes about actors and categories to which scholars have attributed coherent and systematic historical functions a priori and without sufficient evidence. The state, for example, is by no means a solid and rational agent in *Conjuring Property*, while the commonly assumed central position of powerful agribusiness tends to fade behind the complex game of competition, exploitation, and circumstantial alliances between pequenos and grandes. Likewise, property is not the clear juridi-

cal concept we assumed it to be, but a product resulting from the crossing of many variables, such as landscape transformation, storytelling, collective identities, individual projects and, not least, fraud.

Conjuring Property is the latest of a series of recent important works that have considerably sharpened scholarly views of the Amazon, including Greg Grandin's *Fordlandia* (2009), Susanna B. Hecht's *Scramble for the Amazon* (2013), and Seth Garfield's *In Search of the Amazon* (2014). Put together, these contributions show that the Amazon is the product of many imaginaries of the relation between humans and nature. Campbell's particularity and strength, in this bibliographical body, is to show that the making of the modern Amazon is about modeling not only space, but also, and maybe even more importantly, time, of which his book articulates three dimensions. The first is about interpreting the past or forging it. The second concerns living in a "long transitive moment" (in this case, living in the expectation of the state to act), which is a crucial and too-rarely-studied position in history.[4] The third dimension is about preparing for the much-wanted "progress", or what people see as history yet to be written. *Conjuring Property*, a work of great interdisciplinary value, is thus a particularly important book for historians.

Notes

[1]. José de Souza Martins, "Um documento falso sobre a conquista do território dos índios Goitacá," *Revista de Antropologia* 39, no. 2 (1996): 141-163. I am grateful to Diogo Cabral for this reference.

[2]. On the BR-163 as a historical disaster see Maurício Torres, ed., *Amazônia revelada: os descaminhos ao longo da BR-163* (Brasília: CNPq, 2005).

[3]. Probably to avoid writing in a gendered language, Campbell translated this famous image by former military president Emílio Garrastazu Médici (1969-74) as "land without people to peo-

ple without land" (p. 32). However, the original declaration clearly says *homens* (men), and state propaganda regarding the Amazon did use to assign women to a passive and servile position.

[4]. For another valuable work on the Amazon problematizing transition and expectation as a historical state, see Laurent Vidal, *Mazagão, la ville qui traversa l'Atlantique, du Maroc à l'Amazonie (1769-1783)* (Paris: Aubier, 2005).

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